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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of the interview-type of language proficiency evaluation is to get a rough idea of the language learner's ability at oral communicative exchange. However, interview examinations are often structured in such a way that true exchange is unlikely. Questions elicit obvious answers in a way unlike everyday conversation. Potential obstacles to real conversational exchange include tension surrounding the examination, the examiner's manner, the seating arrangement, the subject matter of the exchange, and the number of people involved in the exchange. Reduction of this "paraphernalia of intimidation" would allow learners to do more justice to their own English language ability. While it is difficult to reduce some sources of student tension, the examiner's flexibility and relaxed manner and a comfortable seating arrangement that does not put the examiner and learner in direct opposition can eliminate some tension. The learner could also be allowed to choose the subject matter to encourage him to speak openly about things that are interesting and familiar to him. Group assessment, in which those being evaluated converse with each other in pairs or small groups, under the direction of an interlocutor, shows promise as an assessment technique. (MSE)

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COMMUNICATIVE TALK IN INTERVIEW-TYPE ASSESSMENT OF SPOKEN ENGLISH

William R. Lee

I greatly welcome this opportunity of exchanging ideas on a particular problem with other members of TESOL. I shall leave plenty of time for discussion — about twenty minutes at the end — and I look forward to that as an intrinsic element of this session. I have come here mainly to consult others on the problem of getting learners to talk — children, juniors, adults — during a certain kind of assessment of spoken English.

Before beginning I must do two things: tell you briefly about one of my current preoccupations; and quarrel slightly with my own title.

One of my current obligations is to revise, as basically as seems appropriate, the spoken English assessment procedures of a British examining body. (I am British, by the way.) The scheme of assessment has not been revised, except in fairly minor ways, for more than twenty years, and I'm in the happy position of being able to say what I like about it without hurting anybody's feelings, since I wrote it largely myself. It was more or less in line with fashionable thinking two decades ago, although it was and still is unusual in at least three respects: for instance, in being open to non-native learners of English from seven years of age upwards, anywhere in the world; in making no attempt to assess reading or writing achievement; and in having, for the moment, twelve levels (called Grades) which range from very elementary to very advanced. It was also based on an assumption that the content, language-wise, of each Grade could be specified in terms of structural and functional items, and this I believe is its greatest weakness, although at the time it was drawn up it was seen as its greatest strength.

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As for quarrelling with my title, I merely want to escape from the implications of the word 'interview'. Everybody calls the arrangement whereby the learners go in one by one to meet an assessor an 'interview-type' assessment: perhaps it would be better to call it an 'individual assessment'. In the revision I'm working at (and it's nearing its end) I'm not trying to replace individual assessment (although I shall say a few words about group assessment later) but I am trying to replace, or drastically modify, its 'interview' character. Why? Because the prime purpose, in our scheme, of the meetings between an assessor and learners is to get a rough idea of the learners' ability at oral communicative exchange: that is, of his or her ability at something like conversation. An interview, as distinct from a 'conversation-type' exchange, is a specialised type of communication in which one side asks questions and the other tries to answer them. An interview for a job is like that, although the interviewee may be invited to ask a question or two at the end of it — not including of course 'What are your qualifications to interview me?'. A radio or TV interview is broadly similar, except that the person interviewed is not usually seeking a job (unless he's a politician) and may thus be able to speak more freely. However, the sort of assessment interview favoured by some has not been like these because the interrogator is often not really interested in the answers ('Where do you live?' 'In London Road' — but the interrogator probably won't even know, or want to know, where London Road is or what things are like there.) And the interrogator may often know what the answers are — 'What's the weather like?' 'It's cloudy' — when everybody can see that it's cloudy, so there's no real reason for asking the question. Such questions are asked only to find out whether the victims can understand these words and questions of this type, and whether they can produce a certain type of answer: nothing more. The meeting between interrogator and victim is thus concerned only with a grammatically, and

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perhaps also pseudo-functionally, based syllabus, and simply tries to explore the victim's familiarity with some of its items. The interrogator is after specimens of language, rather as an entomologist is after specimens of insects. At the same time the language used is very limited in its scope, since few or no questions are put by the victim, while the interrogator puts questions most of the time.

Everyday conversation is not like <u>that</u>. There can be questions from both sides, there may be comments, exclamations, requests for repetition or clarification, expansions of what the other has said, reserved or whole-hearted agreement, confirmations, inquiries, refusals, denials, changes of topic and changes of direction — all these and a score of other features are typical of everyday conversation among fairly fluent, and even unfluent, native speakers (and other advanced speakers) of a language, at <u>any age</u>: it is full of a variety of exchange. It is commonly also full of hesitations, back-trackings, changes of structure, and interruptions: why therefore should non-native speakers be penalised for these (as they often are) ?

I am not concerned here and now with all aspects of oral assessment, only with how to get an oral exchange going which is as near as possible to being a conversation, because unless that can be done it will be difficult to judge at all of a learner's conversational ability. There is no great problem in sitting learners down to do reading or writing tasks, but conversation is different: and it cannot be turned on like a tap. We need to abandon the concept of interview and to involve each learner in as genuine an oral exchange as is possible in the circumstances.

But what <u>are</u> the circumstances? One circumstance is that the learners are well aware that their use of English is under observation. After all, they have gone to a particular place at a particular time, and perhaps not of their own free will either, and you don't behave like that to have a conversation:

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you just have it where you are, if the circumstances are favourable. At some time in the ghastly future (to be pessimistic for a moment) it may well happen that the learner--victims will be bugged somehow by mini-microphones secretly concealed in their clothing, and listened to from a distance as someone whom they don't realise is an assessor engages them in use of English: for the present, thank God, such outrages are regarded as unethical, impracticable, and above all — too expensive. But we have to admit, I believe, that a fully natural face-to-face conversation is hard to achieve within examination constraints. That does not mean we can't get somewhere near it.

What stands in the way? One thing that stands in the way — and I come to my first major point — is the paraphernalia of intimidation. It does seem that examinations, even oral ones, are still sometimes surrounded by an atmosphere of awe-inspiring solemnity. This influences both the period of preparation, the learners being frequently reminded of Doomsday ahead and urged to be equal to it, and the Day itself, with its (necessarily) special place and time, its waiting-room and apprehensive waiting, its general air of you-know-you-can't-escape. It is not so everywhere, of course, or at least not to the same degree, nor is it everywhere true that learners enter the judgement room already half-paralysed by a conviction that the supremely important matter is not to make mistakes.

Admittedly it's hard to eliminate nerves and tension altogether, but something can be done. Intelligent teachers and parents will refrain from harping on the coming event, and if learners ask them about it will try to build up their confidence. They should be told — if it's true — that the assessor will be looking for what they can do rather than what they can't do. They should be told — one hopes truthfully —

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that the assessor will be patient and welcoming — and they should be advised to smile and be polite to the assessor, who may be nervous herself (or himself). And so on, though probably the very best thing is not to talk much about it at all.

Much depends on the assessor's manner, which can freeze the learners' English into near-silence or, alternatively, thaw it into a communicative trickle or flood, depending on how much English the learners have in reserve. I heard recently of an assessor, when greeted by a cheerful lad who held out his hand as he met her, responding coldly, 'We don't shake hands in this country'. The country was Britain, as it happened, and the statement doubtfully true, but the point is that no learners, given such a reception, are likely to speak confidently. Fortunately, this sort of thing is far from common.

An assessor can surely be expected to adjust to the learners' ages and on-the-spot behaviour, bearing in mind the tension that has almost inevitably built up by the time they arrive. Is it too much to expect the assessor to stand up and welcome the learner reassuringly? In some places (I would prefer not to specify) the assessor remains seated all the time — a bad custom. Tension is not diminished, either, if the assessor is unseen before the learner enters the room. It is especially important for young children, and even juniors who are new to this sort of thing, to see beforehand that the assessor is a normal-looking friendly person, with one head and not two and no observable forked tail. So the assessor should emerge now and again, and not too infrequently, from his or her cave of mystery (i.e. allotted room, with a notice on the door, 'Keep Out', or words to that effect) and have a cheerful word with those in the waiting-room ('Hullo/Hi, how are you today?' etc.) and no doubt also with a teacher or two, before going back to listen to more learners.

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The set-up in the room itself also has its encouraging or discouraging, tongue-loosening or tongue-binding, effects. The usual seating arrangement, in my own experience of examining and being examined, is the confrontational one, hallowed by long tradition, in which the learner is seated opposite the assessor. But this is only one possibility, and not in all circumstances the best. Young children are often more at ease if the assessor sits down next to them. If the learner has brought something to show, it may be more convenient for both to stand up at another table, depending on what that something is. I see no reason also why assessor and learner should not move about the room: there may be interesting things on the walls to discuss or a window view on which the learner can knowledgeably comment.

It does not help for an assessor to behave like a VIP, a tin-pot god, or a room fixture. 'Flexibility', 'approachability', and humanity are not everything, but they help learners to bring forth their English, such as it is, more willingly.

I now come to a new idea — new to me, at least — which is that the adverse effects on learners of the build-up of some tension before the event can be partly offset not only by a friendly welcome in surroundings as reassuring as possible, but also (and to a much greater extent) by leaving the subject-matter of the oral exchange (the 'near-conversation') to be determined largely by the learner and not by the examining body or assessor. On the whole, I assume, they will choose to converse about something that interests them, and thus will have a good chance of, so to speak, displaying their communicative ability in English to maximum effect: they will actually want to communicate with the assessor.

Children and juniors can be asked to bring things to show and talk about and discuss with the assessor — all sorts of things (within reason). Children (the under 12-s) could bring

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a favourite doll (or a whole row of dolls, for that matter) or a teddy-bear or toys: or birthday presents: photographs of the family or friends: model cars and aeroplanes, etc: puppets: stamp albums or other collections: viewcards: masks: pictures: pets: things they have drawn or made or found — the list could be added to but should be left wide open. Schools would be given guidance. Juniors would no doubt bring similar things, but more reflective of spare-time interests, school perhaps, and holidays with the family. Doubtless a slightly different approach is desirable with adults. They should, I think, be strongly encouraged but not obliged to bring things, and the things they bring can be expected to illustrate or be closely associated with whatever they have chosen as a topic to discuss with the assessor. The subject-matter is not imposed. For the sake not only of giving learners maximum encouragement to speak, but also for fairness' sake, the assumption is made that to present every learner with the same subject (to take an extreme example, the same photograph) is not to give all a task of equal difficulty, since what some find interesting or familiar is uninteresting or unfamiliar to others.

Of course, the learners will prepare and their teachers will advise and help them. There is nothing wrong with that. But rote-learned pieces are unwelcome, as will be carefully explained in the guidance given. Assessors will tactfully break into such a performance and do their best to transform it into an oral exchange.

In my ignorance I know of no examining body that does this kind of thing, but I have heard that in Germany it has been a success — I'm trying to find out where.

Time is running out. I promised to say a few words about group assessment. I have had no first-hand experience of this

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but have heard something about it, since several examining bodies in the UK (e.g. the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate, the English Speaking Board, and the Royal Society of Arts) have for some time past been experimenting with group assessment of one kind or another, mainly with adult learners.

On the face of it, there is a strong case for group assessment. Roughly the argument is that learners will communicate more readily and more naturally with one another than with an assessor. In one arrangement, they interact with an interlocutor, one of their own teachers, who gives them tasks which they have to work out orally with one another, in pairs or very small groups, while the assessor sits, so to speak, on the sidelines, just assessing but taking no part. Another arrangement calls for prior preparation by each learner of a short talk, given in the presence of a small group of fellow-learners, who afterwards ask questions about it. Unfortunately there is no time for me to go into further detail. No doubt there are members of this audience who have been involved in such experiment, and therefore know much more about it than I do. As consultant to another examining body (Trinity College London), I shall recommend the setting up of an experimental project in group assessment, although in my view it has serious disadvantages: for example, and in brief, the subject-matter of the oral exchange is in practice imposed; the learners have not necessarily seen one another previously; two assessors (not one) have to be paid; and the difficulty of assessing two or more learners simultaneously is considerable.

To summarize —

In this session we're concerned only with ways of getting learners to take part in an oral exchange so as to do justice

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to their own command of English and to enable their oral communicative ability to be roughly estimated. My two major points are that what I call 'the paraphernalia of intimidation' needs to be reduced to the greatest extent possible (atmosphere and ambience can have a discouraging effect) and that learners be given the advantage of choosing their own subject-matter and asked to bring things to talk about.

William R. Lee
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